A Taymiyyan Response to New Atheism

By Mohammad Abu AbdurRahman

(The following article is taken from the upcoming book *Ibn Taymiyyah on Divine Simplicity* by Dar al-Arqam Publishing.)

In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Professor Richard Dawkins is perhaps the world's most famous naturalist. In his best-selling book *The God Delusion*, Dawkins presents two main arguments against the existence of God. The first is a scientific argument from the sufficiency of Darwinian evolution, and the second is a philosophical argument from the complexity of God.

On the first argument against God

In his scientific argument, Dawkins more or less argues that the process of evolution by natural selection is a sufficient natural explanation for the diversity of biological life on earth. Since evolution is a sufficient natural explanation, the

existence of the Designer is superfluous. Therefore, the Designer should not be invoked as a causal explanation.

Christian theists have commonly attempted to disprove the sufficiency of evolution as a natural explanation. In doing so, they aim to make room for intelligent design as a scientific explanation. Many Muslim apologists have picked up this approach from their Christian counterparts. Although the intentions of the proponents of this tactic are noble, I believe that it is philosophically mistaken.

A more rational and scriptural approach in refuting the modern atheistic confusion would be to demonstrate the Taymiyyan conception that God's agency is primary while that of natural causation is secondary. In other words, it ought to be demonstrated rationally to the atheist that the God of Abraham is a Creator being who originates things by way of their secondary causes and natural means, without breaking any truly universal law. This Taymiyyan conception of God, who creates ex materia and by way of causes, is indicated in many verses of the Qurʾān and is also remarkably intuitive.

In this theological view of Ibn Taymiyyah, the sufficiency of God for His creations is compatible with the sufficiency of natural and scientific explanations. This is because the creative agency of God and the natural agency of His creations operate in two entirely different domains, with the latter domain being fully subject to the former. In other words, although God is the direct Creator and

Maintainer of everything in the world through will, the natural causes – which are insufficient on their own for producing their effects – come together to form sufficient natural combinations that *necessitate* the subsequent effect given that their potencies are not miraculously invalidated. God *independently* creates the natural effects in this world out of previously created, sufficient combinations of causes, and He may also prevent these particular effects from taking place by miraculously removing the potencies of said causes, or perhaps through some other means, so as to guide the course of the evolution of the universe into a desired future which He has already predestined.

The demonstration of God's primary agency can be achieved through sound rational arguments like the contingency argument and the Qurʾānic argument from substantial origination. The argument from contingency states that the greater the number of contingent things that are included within the set of contingent things, the more the entire set will depend on an external maker. In a similar fashion, the argument from substantial origination states that the more the substances that come into existence and go out of existence in succession, the more they are in need of an external originator that brings them into existence and removes them from existence in succession. Since this maker and originator is outside the set of all originated and contingent existents, it must be both eternal and independent by logical entailment. Ibn Taymiyyah has elaborated considerably on these two arguments for God's existence. More will be said on

these two specific arguments in a future translation on the existence of God – God willing.

Once the existence of a God who creates by way of secondary causes is established, it will also be appreciated that God's act of creation must be compatible with all the kinds of natural explanations that are physically possible. This even includes explanations that involve blind, mechanical processes or interactions of matter, such explanations as Darwinian evolution by random mutation and natural selection (provided it is indeed a physically possible process). The fallacy in Dawkins' argument from the sufficiency of evolution thus becomes patently obvious.

Moreover, the Taymiyyan demonstration of God's primary agency is expected to enhance the believability of miracles and creation stories to the scientific mind. If scientists come to accept the existence of a Creator, miracles such as the origination of a fully-formed man out of the dust of the earth become a very plausible scenario to consider, provided that such miracles do not contradict the complete and accurate formulation of the laws of physics or conflict with any conclusive empirical data. This is because these extremely improbable yet physically possible miracles may be actualized in the world by the external Creator on account of divine purposes consistent with His wisdom and mercy.

The watchmaker analogy

Some theists may take issue with the suggested Taymiyyan response to Dawkins' argument from the sufficiency of evolution. They may feel that accepting the plausibility of Darwinian evolution as a scientific explanation would lessen the appeal of the design arguments, such as the famous watchmaker analogy of William Paley. Furthermore, they may hold that Ibn Taymiyyah's method of demonstrating God's existence says nothing about whether or not the external Cause, who originates living things by way of their causes, is a volitional or intelligent *Designer*. For this reason, it is important to clarify that the Taymiyyan conception of God's primary agency is compatible with the various theological arguments used to demonstrate God's knowledge and wisdom, including the watchmaker analogy which was known to the Kalām theologians as "the argument from precision and excellence".

The sound formulation of the watchmaker analogy, which is in some respects more closely aligned with the design thesis of Asa Gray than it is with William Paley's original formulation, can be presented in the following way. Through experience, we come to realize that watches are made by watchmakers. We also come to identify their distinctive complexity as evidence for intentional design, one that allows us to form similar judgements when reasoning analogically in other cases. For example, the similar complexity of a smartphone allows us to infer conclusively that it was skillfully and intentionally

manufactured by its human maker, even if we have no direct experience of its maker. In the same way, once we experience the resembling complexities in living things, we can conclusively infer that their external Cause who brought them into existence out of their material and natural conditions must possess knowledge and intention, and that He is therefore a *Designer*.

The conclusion of the watchmaker analogy follows necessarily irrespective of the nature of the preceding material and natural conditions from which the life on earth came to be. Living organisms may have initially arisen from simple material conditions miraculously, such as in the origination of a fully-formed man directly out of the dust of the earth, or they may have formed evolutionarily through blind mechanical processes and interactions of matter over sufficiently long periods of time. Alternatively, they may have arisen in part through the volitional agency of sentient creations, such as God's angels who are believed to arrange the matters of this world by His command and through His will. In all of these different scenarios, the primary agency of the external Cause remains a reality and He must therefore be an intelligent *Designer* as is demonstrated through the watchmaker analogy. In fact, the intelligence of the Cause is known with greater reason, for His creations are far more marvelous than a watch, and His primary creative agency is exponentially more perfect than the insufficient agency of a watchmaker.

On the second argument against God

As mentioned, Dawkins is a naturalist who believes that nature is all that exists. This means that he does not accept that the natural world is a contingent system that requires an external Cause constantly changing it and maintaining it. This assumption of naturalism is a key feature of Dawkins' atheistic reasoning, one that colors his second proposed argument against the existence of God, his philosophical argument from complexity.

In his argument from complexity, Dawkins presents the following dichotomy. The Designer is either (i) simple or (ii) complex. Either way, the existence of the Designer is invalidated.

In the first option where the Designer is assumed to be simple, Dawkins points out that such an entity cannot be a "God" in any meaningful sense. This is because a simple Designer cannot possess any attributes such as omnipotence and omniscience, answer our prayers, or forgive our sins. The proponents of Divine Simplicity have failed to answer Dawkins' observation convincingly.

It is worthy to note that Dawkins does accept that this universe could have a simple explanation, namely in the meaningful sense that it came to be from a simple *material condition*. This sense of explaining the universe is not incorrect according to the Taymiyyan conception, which holds that our world came into being out of a simple substance in the form of water beneath the Throne of God.

That said, due to his philosophical position of naturalism, Dawkins erroneously uses this material sense of explanation as a substitute for the more important *efficient* sense, that of the external Cause who originates the universe out of its prior material condition.

As for the second option in which God is assumed to be complex, Dawkins argues that it implies that He must have a designer according to the theistic standard. More clearly, if theists assume that the complexity in living creatures is sound evidence for a Designer, then the greater complexity of the Designer Himself will require another designer a fortiori. This results in an unavoidable regress according to the theistic standard, and also invalidates the existence of the God of Abraham, who is accepted to be an *uncaused* Designer by all claimants of Abrahamic monotheism.

In this way, Dawkins concludes that life on earth was not designed, but rather was formed through evolutionary processes over sufficiently vast stretches of time. According to Dawkins, even if life on earth happens to be intelligently designed, the Designer must have arisen in the past through some natural process that resembled evolution by natural selection. The evolutionary processes are for Dawkins philosophically *necessary* to explain the emergence of any form of life, divine or otherwise, from its simple origins. Otherwise, the Designer would be emerging through the agency of another more elaborate designer in an infinite

regress of materially complex, intelligent designers, which is far less plausible than evolution.

Although Dawkins' argument from complexity has successfully confused many into accepting atheism, it suffers from a subtle weakness. The argument falsely assumes that a Designer must be a *natural* agent, an entity that emerges from preceding material conditions. Ibn Taymiyyah's refutation of Divine Simplicity provides us with a way out of this intellectual trap that was cleverly set by Dawkins.

In effect, Dawkins is presenting theists with a false dichotomy. He argues that the Designer must either be (i) simple and without any attributes or agency, such that He fails to be God, or (ii) complex in a sense that involves divisibility and contingency, requiring an explanation like all phenomena within the natural world. If the truth can be found in a third option, theists will not be rationally obligated to pick one of the two options in the dichotomy.

Ibn Taymiyyah presents us with this third, highly intuitive option, which happens to be accessible to the untainted minds of little children. He proposes that (iii) God is both spatial *and* indivisible. God is a tremendous Creator being who created us in His image, is spatially distinct from the world, and is described with real, numerically distinct attributes and voluntary acts. At the same time, God is unlike the contingent structures that require external explanations, for He is indivisible and is not composed of separate substances that are located in

distinct spaces. All of the philosophical objections raised against this intuitive conception of God fail miserably according to Ibn Taymiyyah.

Concluding remarks

The suggested Taymiyyan response to Dawkins' argument from complexity can make some theists nervous. Many theists uphold the view that God is spaceless and timeless in order to maintain His unparalleled and unique nature, and they worry that the notion of a spatial God who created us in His image (in the apparent linguistic sense) will undermine this uniqueness and render God into a contingent being that requires an explanation. Moreover, upon considering the spatiality of God, their imaginations may become rampant with false mental images of the Divine which they may be unable to repel effectively. In the effort of avoiding these disturbing whisperings, they may turn to the other extreme, denying the spatiality of God altogether and leaning towards the position of Divine Simplicity. It is therefore crucial to make the following clarification.

Ibn Taymiyyah consistently argued that the authentic Islamic answer to such difficulties, which is supported by the theological understanding of the early Muslims, is to affirm the reality of God's attributes that were mentioned in Scripture using the analogical sense of predication, while also affirming that they are unequalled by the attributes of created beings. More clearly, it is to strike a

delicate balance between the apophatic theological tendencies that deny God His attributes, on the one hand, and the assimilationist tendencies that make God equal to His creations, on the other. In this balanced view of Ibn Taymiyyah, God is neither a man nor a formless being. Rather, He is an *eternal* Creator being who has made man *in His image*, and yet is transcendent and unimaginably majestic, beautiful, and holy.

Perhaps the Taymiyyan conception of divine transcendence can be appreciated through the following a fortiori analogy. Gingerbread can technically be in the image of its baker, which is why it is called a gingerbread "man". However, no reasonable person will claim that the gingerbread is equal to its baker. Likewise, God creating us in His image does not imply that He must be paralleled in His beauty and perfection. In fact, this is with greater reason, because the difference between the necessary Cause and the contingent effects is far greater than the difference between one contingent effect and another. The perfection of God with respect to what He makes is far greater than the perfection of a human baker with respect to what he bakes.

The last of our prayers is

"All praise is due to God, the Lord of Creation"

Further reading:

(1) YouTube video of this article:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WX5y3mLZ68I

(2) YouTube lecture on the arguments from contingency and substantial origination (includes Arabic subtitles): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_s5kOPXclc

(3) *Ibn Taymiyyah on Creation ex Materia*, 2023, Birmingham: Dar al-Arqam:

https://www.daral-arqam.co.uk/product/ibn-taymiyyah-on-creation-ex-materia

- Link to erratum: https://archive.org/details/erratum-ibn-taymiyyah-on-creation-ex-materia/page/n7/mode/2up

(4) Ibn Taymiyya's entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-taymiyya/

- Link to section on God's relationship to space: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-taymiyya/#GodSpac

- Link to section on God's relationship to time: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ibn-taymiyya/#GodCreaTime

(5) Related discussion on the Richard Dawkins' Foundation for Reason and Science site (RDFRS): https://richarddawkins.net/2023/08/open-discussion-august-2023/#comment-213867

- Documentation of discussion (includes the text of the deleted post):

https://archive.org/details/open-discussion-thread-august-2023-rdfrs/page/n3/mode/2up

- Video documentation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1CIzBI8rqA

(6) *Shining Pearls of Faith*, Mohammad Abu AbdurRahman:

https://archive.org/details/shining-pearls-of-faith